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## Fair game or fair go? Impact of news reporting on victims and survivors of traumatic events

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# **Fair Game Or Fair Go?**

## **Impact Of News Reporting On Victims And Survivors Of Traumatic Events**

*When traumatic incidents occur, victims and survivors – as well as their families, friends and immediate communities – respond in varying ways. Over the past century, however, researchers have mapped common psychosocial consequences for victims/survivors in their studies of what has come to be known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Over the same period, journalists and news media managers have adopted local, medium-specific and industry-wide journalistic standards for acceptable ethical and operational behaviours when it comes to covering such incidents. Yet, despite numerous prescriptive codes – and growing public criticism – Australia's news media continues to confront victims/survivors in large numbers when they are at their most vulnerable... and sometimes in ways that are, at best, questionable. Drawing on the experiences of those touched by the 1996 Port Arthur massacre and by industrial deaths, this paper examines the consequences of media actions for victims/survivors.*

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Quantification of the impact of media reporting on victims of trauma and critical incidents is a new area of research. However, there are growing bodies of research and knowledge about three central elements which contribute to the potential impacts of media reporting on victims and survivors – the psychology of trauma, journalistic practice and crisis communication. Some work on trauma and journalism has been completed at two United States universities (by Roger Simpson et al. at the University of Washington and William Cote and Bonnie Bucqueroux at Michigan State University). At the Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia, similar work is beginning in its School of Media and Journalism. Fieldwork by

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this researcher – a former senior newspaper journalist who has practised in Queensland and Victoria – constitutes some of the earliest work being done with victims.

This paper looks at the effect of journalistic activities on victims/survivors and their families/communities in the wake of traumatic events. It draws on research conducted across three Australian states in late 1999 that included:

- 16 structured, in-depth interviews with people who had confronted a multiple-victim traumatic event (either the Port Arthur massacre on 28 April 1996 or the death in the workplace of a close relative or partner over the past 13 years),
- a focus group discussion with eight participants who had experienced a (usually single-victim) workplace death
- four structured, in-depth interviews with relatives or partners of those who died in the workplace; and
- five detailed conversations with experts who dealt with these traumatic incidents (a forensic psychiatrist, an author, an electronic media journalist, a government media liaison officer and a counsellor to victims/survivors).

The Port Arthur massacre in Tasmania was reportedly the world's most deadly toll by a single gunman in a non-war setting, with 35 deaths spread over six distinct crime scenes. A further 20 people had their lives threatened, three people received serious physical injuries and eight others were wounded. A fire razed a home, hundreds of shots were exchanged with police and there was an overnight siege with hostages. This event was complex for journalists to report and confounding for investigators to recreate. The massacre occurred on a remote peninsula on a Sunday afternoon when more than 500 visitors were in the grounds of the Port Arthur Historical Site. The danger subsided more than 19 hours later, but – nearly four years after – shockwaves are still being felt.

By comparison – given that individual deaths in the workplace virtually outstrip the number of deaths on the nation's roads each year – fatal workplace incidents are often under-reported, leaving shocked and grief-stricken relatives and friends to deal with sudden, violent loss in a "news vacuum". In Victoria, a group known as Industrial Death Support and Advocacy is lobbying for recognition and assistance for the families of these (usually) single-victim traumas.

The aim of this paper is to look at broad issues concerning victims/survivors about the way the media reports traumatic events. It would be constructive if these insights were acknowledged and addressed by the media in order to ensure better journalistic practice is employed when covering traumatic incidents in future. The first section of this paper outlines what a

cross-section of academic literature has to say about the psychology of trauma, journalistic practice and crisis communication. This establishes the definitions and frameworks that underpin the remainder of the paper, which details how the research was conducted and what Australian victims/survivors have to say about how their traumatic incidents have been reported. This paper concludes with a number of recommendations for improved media practice.

## Psychology Of Trauma

Work done by psychiatrists and psychologists over the past century has established international protocols for identifying common physical and psychological responses to traumatic situations and for the clinical diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in victims/survivors.<sup>1</sup> While debate remains heated when it comes to accurate diagnoses, correct treatment and appropriate prevention options,<sup>2</sup> practitioners and researchers concur that – in any given population or community that has experienced a traumatic or critical incident – responses vary from person to person and can be immediate or delayed.<sup>3</sup> Victims/survivors who experience PTSD appear to be unable to process their traumatic experiences and, consequently, continue to be troubled by vivid flashbacks, powerful recollections and other physical and psychological responses well after the event/danger has passed.<sup>4</sup>

Psychologists agree that debilitating PTSD symptoms are common after extreme events. Such events, by their nature, include threat/s to one's own life or the loss of a loved one in sudden, violent circumstances. Symptoms may persist for a short period, for years or for the remainder of one's life. They may be chronic or intermittent, triggered unexpectedly or periodically. Of those who seek professional help to overcome debilitating PTSD symptoms, most find some relief, but anything like a "cure" eludes a significant number. Much research and clinical-practice literature confirms that early diagnosis and treatment appear to increase the likelihood of success (e.g. van der Kolk et al. 1996).

Advances in the study of trauma and PTSD have mainly occurred in the wake of wars – where returning soldiers were observed to be suffering "war neuroses" or "shell shock" after exposure to traumatic events. The cluster of symptoms known as PTSD is widely observed in victims/survivors of other serious incidents, including rape, attempted murder, violent assaults and even motor vehicle accidents.

PTSD sufferers are unable to function in the way they normally would. Some theorists argue the severity of symptoms – and, hence, length of any potential recovery – is magnified if

## Journalistic Practice

the traumatic event results from the deliberate action (or inaction) of one or more humans rather than a perceived accident or “act of nature” such as a flood, earthquake or tidal wave.<sup>5</sup> A common symptom for all PTSD sufferers is the persistent re-experiencing of the traumatic event. An exact list of other potential symptoms and maladaptive behaviours is outlined by the American Psychiatric Association in its publication *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th Edition, 1994).<sup>6</sup>

Because imagery, flashbacks and recounting what happened are integral to victims’ traumatic responses, a question then arises as to whether those who experience a traumatic event – regardless of whether they develop PTSD or not – are especially at risk from the media’s news-gathering actions or by its subsequent reports.<sup>7</sup> According to psychiatrists, trauma counsellors and psychologists,<sup>8</sup> even when the media publish first-person accounts of what happened or how it had since affected victims/survivors and their families, friends and communities, such reports can be distressing for others affected by that event. Not everyone will share the same incident experiences, background or social groups. A growing number of Australian victims/survivors are questioning the way news media work in times of trauma.<sup>9</sup>

In terms of accepted industry-wide ethical practice, Australian journalists<sup>10</sup> have a raft of professional expectations set out for them in the Media and Entertainment Arts Alliance’s AJA Code of Ethics. The new code, formally approved in 1999 after several years of discussion, is clear about displaying sensitivity, providing adequate disclosure and discouraging deceptive practices. There are additional, medium-specific operational and performance requirements for print, radio and television journalists (usually known as codes of practice). In most large media organisations such as the ABC, Fairfax and News Limited, there is yet another set of institutional guidelines for appropriate behaviour when reporting in the field or subsequently publishing reports.

Despite this apparent extensive “self-regulation”, there is a groundswell of criticism about the Australian media’s behaviour when covering traumatic or critical situations, the echoes of which were heard in the 1998 Senate Select Committee hearings into the self-regulation of communication and information industries. While many instances of media “malpractice” were cited at the Senate’s hearings, the Committee also heard of the inadequacy of complaints mechanisms currently overseen by the Australian Press Council, the Australian Broadcasting Authority and individual media outlets (whether privately or publicly owned). Similarly

criticised were Australia's defamation laws, which do not deliver affordable means of seeking legal redress for the average citizen.

Communication during the chaos and confusion that inevitably reigns in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic or critical event is fraught with problems.<sup>11</sup> For instance, it usually takes some time before numbers of dead and injured can be determined and confirmed by police, to establish the status and whereabouts of those injured and to locate witnesses. Consequently, early media reports are often short on detail, long on speculation and prone to inaccuracy.

Often news reports reach victims/survivors and their families/communities before official notice is possible, causing additional distress.<sup>12</sup> Victims/survivors interviewed for this research felt decision-makers in the media should better appreciate the time-lines involved after a traumatic incident, especially that the thorough and time-consuming process of identifying a body or victim can take hours and that officials can have difficulty notifying next of kin. Several participants could vividly recall media images/texts of reports or requests for interviews that predated – sometimes by several hours – their official notification of their loved one's death. Indeed such images/sounds/words seemed to form a core part of their painful recollections and flashbacks.

For this research, identification of traumatic events and critical incidents themselves was not a difficult task, given the steady flow of major local, national and international incidents which have attracted extensive – and increasingly more intimate – media coverage. As a result of those traumatic events – mass murders, bombings, natural disasters, horrific crimes, etc. – many people's lives have been touched and irrevocably changed. In approaching people to participate in this research, the researcher was aware many would have suffered greatly already and, in some cases, might still be suffering. The challenge faced was to inflict no further harm while attempting to determine what effects media reporting or media reports had on participants during, and since, their traumatic incident/s. Despite this, participants were remarkably willing to share recollections of acutely painful and distressing experiences. Most agreed to be part of this research "as long as some good comes from it".

Twelve in-depth, standardised interviews were conducted with participants who had experienced the same multiple-victim event (the 1996 Port Arthur massacre), with each interview lasting

## Crisis Communication

## Sample And Methodology

between 1.5 and 2.5 hours. The eight men and four women were either (1) victims/survivors themselves, (2) family members or friends of victims/survivors, or (3) pivotal community members from the Tasman Peninsula who had a strong connection to this event. A further five substantial conversations were conducted with significant others involved in this event – a forensic psychiatrist, an author, an electronic media journalist, a government media liaison officer and a counsellor to victims/survivors. Two of these were male, three female.

When it came to researching single-victim events, the researcher firstly chaired a 1.5 hour discussion with eight members (two male, six female) of the Industrial Death Support and Advisory (IDSA) who had shared their experiences with the media in the wake of several workplace deaths in the state of Victoria. This was followed by four in-depth interviews with four women, all IDSA members, who had experienced sudden loss of a parent, partner or child from four separate events that took place in different workplaces. Those surveyed were interviewed at varying periods since those events took place (18 months, two years, four years and 13 years).

Third-party facilitation was also an important factor in the high acceptance rate experienced when approaching potential participants. A chance conversation with the Salvation Army's Lt. Col. Don Woodland – who has assisted many victims/survivors of “big news” events for the past three decades – prompted me to assess the impact of news reporting on victims of the Port Arthur massacre. An experienced trauma counsellor from Victoria, Louise Bailey, facilitated contact with a number of people who had lost a partner, parent or child as the result an industrial accident.

## Scope Of Research

This research will document incidents that reflect journalists in both a positive and a negative light. Examination of instances of best and worst practice when it comes to reporting trauma is critical for a number of reasons. Most participants felt that those most affected would not have the energy to formally complain about the media in the wake of their trauma, because they would initially just struggle to do the simplest tasks and get through each day. However, across both multiple- and single-victim events, there was clear evidence that, traumatic and grief responses notwithstanding, quite soon after a traumatic event, victims, survivors, families, friends and communities are driven to find out who, what, where, when and why an event took place. At the same time, the core challenge for news media covering such events is to deliver answers to a curious and often sympathetic world that exists largely beyond those directly affected.

Advances in telecommunications, broadcasting and Internet technology over the past three decades mean today's news media quickly transmits images and reports of almost any traumatic event into homes half a world away. It delivers that same news to the homes of those in the very street or district where the event occurred – often within minutes of it happening or even as the drama unfolds. This puts pressure on journalists in all media to report events quickly and, due to the very nature of competition, with increasing intimacy. How much of this rush to cover traumatic events is healthy, and when does the focus on increasingly graphic details move the media from covering an event to intruding upon the vulnerable, those people affected by that event?

There are unseen and ongoing impacts on victims, survivors, families, friends and communities of such media coverage. While print and electronic journalists often regard their work as “here today, gone tomorrow”, those directly affected by a traumatic event often closely and repeatedly examine media reports to help them construct meaning, i.e., both a broad chronology of what happened and, if possible, why it happened.<sup>13</sup> In the struggle to make meaning, many of those directly affected were supplied with (or sought) copies of news from family members and friends who lived elsewhere (interstate or overseas) or even from news outlets directly.

Their use of the media to construct meaning appears particularly important, because victims and experts noted that individual news reports or images had often been triggers for distressing responses. These ranged from immediate physical stress symptoms (such as increased heart rate, palpitations and cold sweats) to longer-term psychological problems (such as horrendous flashbacks, disturbing dreams, deep depression, substance abuse, episodes of self-mutilation and suicide ideation or attempts) and even included a sudden death.

Such responses occurred immediately after the traumatic event or even months or years later, but especially around the time of anniversaries or when retrospectives (of that event or similar events) recycled details, themes and images, sometimes with no warning. The power of imagery was underscored in one case, where the viewing without warning of video footage of a partner's death scene some months afterwards precipitated full-blown PTSD symptoms, a significant portion of which were still evident more than a year later. It should be noted that, in this particular case, the footage was neither shot nor supplied by the media, but by a regulatory body and mistakenly forwarded to the deceased's partner by a lawyer along with other media footage.

Images and reports that can cause so much pain to victims /



survivors and their families/communities often resurface when they are submitted for national or state journalism awards. Some interviewees hurt by initial reports or images reported their disgust at such industry recognition, especially when the reports/images were broadcast and/or reprinted within the painful first year of the incident and without prior warning.

Additional, unnecessary distress and avoidable harm was also intentionally inflicted on victims, survivors, families and communities. Some in the media were, and continue to be, blatantly insensitive in their news gathering or reporting. Others could – by any ethical, legal or moral measure – stand accused of malpractice. Several participants reported that deception, duplicity, lies and offensive suggestions were used to cajole or coerce potential interviewees or to gain access to “off-limits” areas. In the eyes of those most affected, the thoughtless (or wanton) actions of the few besmirched forever the reputations of the many and, in their wake, other media found their jobs much more difficult to complete.

For those outside the media, it is often difficult to understand that journalists face enormous challenges to achieve accurate reports within relentless deadlines as sketchy, confused details unfold from a vast array of sources. Securing people’s safety, tending to the wounded and detaining a perpetrator necessarily come ahead of the information needs and deadlines of the media. Yet to ensure the public remains informed – and hopefully to prevent such a tragedy recurring – it is essential police, politicians, other agencies and affected individuals continue to provide the media with newsworthy details.

One obvious problem with complex events played out over longer periods – such as the Port Arthur massacre – is that, from the outset, they generate enormous amounts of newsworthy detail from many sources which journalists then attempt to fit into known reporting “frameworks”. These usually initially constitute the “guts, gore and grief” of the situation. Back in the newsrooms, when making decisions about what to publish or broadcast, decision-makers often blanket their coverage with a patchwork of “bite-sized” chunks rather than longer, in-depth pieces.

Over the following hours and days, news teams face stiff competition both from within their own newsrooms and outside their organisations to deliver the “most comprehensive” coverage to ensure immediate ratings points and longer-term professional kudos. As obvious news angles about the event itself begin to dry up, the media draws on other “reliables”, moving the focus to community grief, unearthing accusations or apportioning blame, running conflicting accounts or divergent explanations. Reports even begin to focus on the “good news” by covering the

community's first steps towards recovery, spotlighting both the confused and the confusing – in order to keep the story alive, oblivious to the fact that, for many of those directly affected, recovery may be extremely distant prospect.

Journalists covering traumatic incidents face a dilemma about what reports or images to include or leave out – often without the benefit of first-hand knowledge of those directly affected. They also face the exciting but uncertain situation that their reports and images are virtually legally unfettered until someone is formally charged and legal/investigative processes get underway.

In the case of the Port Arthur massacre, former Tasmanian Director of Public Prosecutions (now Commonwealth DPP) Damian Bugg actively intervened after a few days of media frenzy. He reminded decision-makers that careless reporting could jeopardise any future case against the then accused gunman, Martin Bryant, and potentially draw subjudice action from the bench.<sup>14</sup> As it turned out, Bryant subsequently changed his plea from not guilty to guilty and a trial was averted. However, in the absence of a coronial inquest into the shootings, many victims/survivors and their families/communities were reliant on media reports to piece together what happened.

Bryant's actions have become Australia's most widely reported criminal actions. Coverage of this massacre outstripped that of the Hoddle Street and Queen Street massacres in Victoria, the Westfield Shopping Centre shootings in New South Wales and even Scotland's tragic Dunblane school massacre that predated Bryant's carnage by only a few weeks. In Tasmania's print media alone, there have been well over 600 news stories published in metropolitan, regional and suburban newspapers in the first three and a half years after the event. While coverage of the events at Port Arthur was unprecedented in Australian media history, it accords with more recent "micro-coverage" of multiple-victim traumatic events such as high school shootings in the United States. In 1999, a teacher and 13 students died before two gunmen turned their weapons on themselves in the Columbine High School at Littleton in Colorado. Similar close media coverage of schoolyard carnage occurred in 1998 at Jonesboro (Arkansas), Paducah (Kentucky) and Pearl (Mississippi), with on-line news agencies like CNN beginning around-the-clock coverage and analysis within hours of the shootings.

Less than a year after the 1996 massacre, Royal Hobart Hospital's director of emergency medicine, Dr David Smart, told a seminar on Port Arthur organised by Emergency Management

## Port Arthur Massacre

Australia that the “continuous pressure of media added significantly to the workload of key senior medical and administrative staff of the hospital”.<sup>15</sup> The hospital endured several bomb threats when the media reported that Bryant was under the same roof as his victims and their devastated families. For days, the media camped on the forecourt of the hospital, looking for every skerrick of news, jostling those attempting to visit injured family, friends or colleagues. Few visitors or staff spoke to the media; many expressed outright contempt at their presence. One cadet journalist who witnessed the “pack” phenomenon for the first time at the hospital was so distressed she required counsel from her chief-of-staff and colleagues, followed by some unscheduled time off to consider whether to continue in the profession at all.<sup>16</sup>

If one revisits media coverage of the Port Arthur massacre, sensationalism and insensitivity are readily evident. There were powerful, evocative headlines, often penned by media personnel who never left the relative comfort of their offices in Hobart, Melbourne, Sydney or elsewhere. Snappy captions accompanied graphic photographs of the dead and injured, while snazzy line drawings “recreated” the scene for those who were not there. For those affected by Bryant (but perhaps not present when the shootings took place), such reports and illustrations created vivid pictures of the horrors their loved ones endured. They said what they needed from journalists was compassion, but instead they experienced callous competition as the media “hunted like a pack”.

After speaking to a cross-section of those touched by this massacre, it was clear that competition – both between commercial media organisations and with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and international media – worsened as the days went on. Hundreds of local, national and international journalists jockeyed to be first with the latest news or the juiciest angle. Unsavoury “deal-making” was the order of the day for some media outlets. Eyewitness accounts were “stitched up”, and the chequebooks came out to secure “rights” to amateur still photographs and video footage taken during the massacre.<sup>17</sup> Such deals were quickly followed by various bids for “exclusives” and even ultimatums, with one journalist even threatening to disclose adverse angles to ensure an interview was given. Tasmania Police officials confirmed claims by participants of such “media harassment”.

Victims/survivors, witnesses, families and communities described incidents of media insensitivity even after Bryant had been captured. For instance, the host of one national (mainland-based) current affairs program secured an exclusive interview with

the grieving Walter Mikac even before the bodies of his wife and children had been removed from the site. The high-profile journalist was rushed to the Tasman Peninsula by helicopter which attempted to land in the grounds of the district's only school that was located across the road from Mikac's pharmacy and within walking distance of his home. This small school lost one of its pupils in the shooting, and many pupils and staff had lived through a terrifying afternoon/night with the stark sounds of helicopters and hundreds of gunshots being exchanged between the gunman and police. Many who died or were injured were well known by, or related to, students and staff.

The school's angry council slapped an immediate and permanent ban on any further media approaches to those at the school. As a consequence of that exclusive deal for one media outlet, a police officer and security guards were engaged to enforce a "media exclusion" zone for weeks after the event. Some months later, a local ABC TV reporter was compiling a report about how the community was recovering and interviewed the school's principal. The still-enraged school council met immediately, censured the principal and appealed directly to ABC management in Hobart, insisting the interview not be included in the final report. It was not included in the report when it went to air.

Pestering of potential interviewees was also common. Some participants reported up to two dozen incoming media calls a day during the two weeks after the event. Some still receive periodic calls for comment on controversial issues that can be in some way related to the events of 28 April 1996.

In Margaret Scott's (1997) sobering account of those events in *Port Arthur: A Story of Strength and Courage*, site staff told how incoming media calls continuously jammed the limited number of telephone lines in the first hours after the shooting began. They were trying to convince authorities about what had happened and to establish the whereabouts of the gunman. Ironically, a staff member from CNN's Atlanta office managed to call the security manager at Port Arthur and told him the gunman was surrounded by police at the nearby Seascope Cottages, yet local authorities could not.

Many concerns raised by those affected by the Port Arthur massacre were also raised by participants who had experienced the sudden, violent death of a loved one in an industrial accident. Much of the anguish and distraction caused by the circumstances of sudden, violent death was evident in this cluster of participants who had experienced loss in a single- or multiple-victim incident. PTSD symptoms were also evident, and these (with treatment)

## Deaths In The Workplace

appeared most severe in the first six to 18 months after the death had occurred. Participants in this cluster again complained of mostly shallow, clichéd news coverage that focused more on the circumstances of the death rather than the person killed and what contribution they had made to their families/communities. Participants also reported insensitive approaches by news media at funerals, coronial inquiries, memorial services or subsequent protest marches, yet the same interviewees noted that not all journalists had treated them badly. Many had high praise for compassionate, careful journalists who checked even minor details to ensure their accuracy.

However, while multiple-victim murders like that at Port Arthur tend to receive saturation coverage, industrial deaths are often given minimal coverage unless they occur in unusual circumstances, in high-profile or controversial locations or on “slow news days”. This, in itself, is frustrating and dispiriting according to participants.

Several relatives were concerned that accidents had been reported on radio or television several hours before next of kin and immediate family could be formally notified. In some cases, families themselves had a good idea of the identity of the person who had died either through direct clues (such as mention of the occupation of the deceased and/or the location of the accident), various “premonitions” or outright naming of the victim.

One participant whose son died from injuries sustained in an explosion at his workplace, said she had been haunted by a photograph, taken by someone on an adjoining property moments after the explosion, which had been sold to a metropolitan newspaper and run the following morning. It showed dazed staff wandering around the site of the explosion. Her son was shown wearing just his boots, his burnt flesh and other wounds exposed to the world.

## Clusters Of Concerns

From this research, three main clusters of concern have been identified:

1) Legal/ethical/moral issues that concern/distress those dealing with the media after a traumatic event:

- disregard for the predicament victims/survivors and their families/communities find themselves in;
- evidence of trespass, deception, fraudulent misrepresentation, entrapment;
- sending young/inexperienced journalists to cover major events (without mentor/s);
- “crossing the line” in the name of circulation/ratings;
- “crossing the line” because of pressure from newsrooms;

- deal-making – approaching victims/survivors and/or their families/friends for “exclusives”;
- going for the well-worn clichéd news frames of gore, guts and grief;
- selecting sensation over substance;
- many of those people the media comes into contact with after such events lack even a basic understanding of how to deal with one journalist, let alone dozens or hundreds; and
- it is not the role or responsibility of these people to engage with the media, yet the media act as though it is.

(2) Dubious practice in the field:

- swarming and badgering victims/families – the “pack” and the “pests”;
- insensitive approaches, callous questions or tasteless photographs – lack of empathy;
- lies, deviousness and placing victims/survivors in further peril;
- assumption of particulars, inaccuracy with details;
- competition outweighing compassion when it comes to victims/families/communities; and
- the absence of “pooling” to reduce load on victims/survivors, families/communities and service providers.

(3) Newsroom/publication decisions that cause further alarm:

- inappropriate use of images/sounds which cause further upset/harm;
- exposing victims/families/friends to harrowing accounts/images of their loved ones;
- repeated re-exposures – retrospectives, comparisons to similar events, anniversaries;
- “juicy” speculation/innuendo, deliberate slanting of reports;
- absence of understanding of how trauma impacts on victims/survivors and how secondary trauma can impact on first responders, children, elderly, friends, mentally ill and journalists; and
- lack of consideration for scope and timing of – as well as triggers for – traumatic responses.

The irony of “media malpractice” in the wake of traumatic events is that it:

- often harms the very audiences the media depend on;
- serves to silence cautious victims/survivors/families and communities;

- leads to unbalanced reporting of facts;
- erodes public confidence in the profession, turning supporters into cynics; and
- can have unseen consequences which could prove costly in future.

Some reasons behind “malpractice” could include:

- young /inexperienced journalists feel their careers are “on the line” if they don’t deliver what the newsroom wants, despite the facts or obstacles they encounter in the field;
- decision-makers underestimate the number of people potentially traumatised by an event;
- journalists and decision-makers lack independent feedback (could the Internet or an ombudsman assist here?);
- despite the industry-wide code of ethics, medium-specific codes of practice and local operational guidelines, distribution and discussion of best practice information related to the covering of traumatic events is patchy;
- journalists and media decision-makers receive little training about trauma and its impacts;
- journalists and decision-makers are not encouraged enough to reflect on the ramifications of their actions;
- journalists and decision-makers use deadlines and competition to excuse malpractice; and
- cynicism and competition are so ingrained in the media that little else matters.

## Proposals

Former Tasman Peninsula pharmacist Walter Mikac – who lost his wife and two young daughters in the massacre at Port Arthur – has written a frank and uncomfortable account of what it is like to grapple with terrible grief and trauma under the glare of an incessant and often insensitive media spotlight. His book *To Have And To Hold*, co-written in 1997 with freelance journalist Lindsay Simpson – along with the Port Arthur Seminar Papers published by Emergency Management Australia – should be compulsory reading for those who report on traumatic events or deploy others to cover such incidents.

Michigan State University researchers Cote and Bucqueroux (1996) have also developed some tips for interviewing victims:

- tell people they can take a break from interviews whenever they need to;
- empower victims by giving them permission to turn off the tape recorder whenever they want to say something that they do not want used;
- ask them to tell you when to put down your notebook;

- take advantage of opportunities to include them in the decision-making (“Are you ready to go on?” “Is it all right for me to ask a tough question?”);

- give the subjects your business card – tell them that they can call you to discuss the story or just to talk;

- take care with first impressions (body language, in particular, can be important, and the goal is to exude confidence, poise and caring);

- discuss ground rules up front (ambush tactics have no place in a victim interview);

- discussing issues of privacy and confidentiality at the beginning can prevent misunderstanding and problems later;

- encourage the victim to ask questions;

- prepare for the possibility you will be the first to deliver (or discuss) the bad news;

- ask permission (approach without your notebook in hand; ask if you can take notes; ask if you can use a tape recorder; it is better to ask whether they would like a tissue than to thrust the box at them);

- watch what you say (a “canned” phrase that strikes the right note is better than wrong words which may wound – “I’m sorry this happened to you”, “I’m glad you weren’t killed”, “It’s not your fault”);

- avoid the banal and never say “I know how you feel”, instead ask a “when” question (“When did you hear the news?”, “When did the police arrive?”);

- above all, be accurate – errors that make ordinary people angry can become monumental issues for traumatised people looking for a target for their frustration;

- be especially sensitive to imputations of blame; and

- be alert to the special impact of photos, graphics and overall presentation.

These recommendations were useful when interviewing victims/survivors for this research, and survivors/victims appreciated and singled out things like sensitivity, ethical behaviour, attention to detail and, above all, accuracy.

Valuable insights and anecdotal evidence shared participants has contributed greatly to the scope and depth of this work, reinforcing a good part of the earlier academic research. As a result, the researcher has six specific conclusions for journalists and media decision-makers:

(1) the body of knowledge about trauma and its impacts is freely available and is already being used by many “first responder” agencies (e.g. ambulance, fire/rescue, SES, police) which have developed sophisticated systems to deal with it over the past decade, yet it appears to be largely overlooked by



Australian media decision-makers who continue to assign unprepared news teams to cover critical incidents;

(2) Australia's "self-regulated" media relies too much on "public interest" and "freedom of the press v. censorship" arguments to defend what are actually incidents of malpractice and voyeurism;

(3) current journalistic practice in Australia does not always give those involved "a fair go" because it seeks to impose operational constraints and paradigms which are neither broadly understood, nor accepted, outside the media;

(4) Australian media should be more committed to improving journalistic practice because that would help improve the industry's reputation which, in turn, would make it easier for journalists to do their jobs effectively;

(5) unless media outlets address malpractice issues, they may soon be held culpable for trauma caused by their actions via civil or workplace health and safety litigation; and

(6) enough people are going to express concern to Australian authorities about media malpractice that, eventually, regulation will become inevitable.

The challenge is for the media to openly discuss the potential impacts of news reporting on victims/survivors and their families/communities and admit that past indiscretions have had very real and painful effects on quite a number of people. Then they need to work at changing journalistic practice to prevent further unnecessary harm.

## NOTES

- 1 Classic PTSD "symptoms" are articulated in DSM-IV, the most recent revision of a useful diagnostic tool developed by the American Psychiatric Association.
- 2 One school – typified by Mitchell, J.T. and Dyregrov, A. (1993) – proports that PTSD can be minimised in emergency service personnel and other first responders by implementing carefully planned Critical Incident Stress Management systems which include a component known as Critical Incident Stress Debriefing. Another group – represented by academics such as Wilson, J.P. and Raphael, B. (1993) – challenge that CISD and CISM are yet to face (and survive) rigorous academic analysis. While some post-1993 research casts doubt on the suitability of CISD/CISM, emergency services personnel continue to use these tools throughout Australia and are supportive of their place in minimising harm to first responders. Concern about frequency of PTSD diagnoses has also been raised following an upswing of such diagnoses

- in compensation and other legal cases.
- 3 See Figley, C.R. (1985a, 1985b and 1995); Janoff-Bulman, R. (1985); Howarth, I. and Dusseyer, I.E. (1988); Grabosky, P.N. (1989); Mitchell, J.T., and Bray, G.P. (1989); Myers, D.G. (1989); Creamer, M., Burgess, P., Buckingham, W., and Pattison, P. (1993); Mitchell, J.T. and Dyregrov, A. (1993); Ursano, R.J., McCaughey, B.G. and Fullerton, C.S. (Eds.) (1994); Green, L., and Cloonan, D. (1996); Resnick, J. (1996); van der Kolk, B.A., McFarlane, A. and Weisaeth, L. (Eds.) (1996); Scott, M. (1997); Rock, P. (1998); and Simpson, R., Koehler, E., and Martin, B. (1998).
  - 4 This explanation was provided by Victorian trauma counsellor Louise Bailey who has worked with survivors of trauma for more than a decade, including several who experienced the Port Arthur massacre as well as relatives of those killed in industrial accidents.
  - 5 Various authors in Wilson, J.P., and Raphael, B. (Eds) (1993).
  - 6 These are known as the "diagnostic criteria for PTSD".
  - 7 These issues were addressed during 1999 field interviews with victims/survivors and their families/communities done by the author in Tasmania, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland as well as various discussions during the 1998 Senate Select Committee hearing into self-regulation or communication and information industries.
  - 8 Raised by Victorian trauma counsellor Louise Bailey, Tasmanian forensic psychiatrist Dr Ian Sale and mentioned in frequently in clinical practice literature reviewed for this paper.
  - 9 The Australian Senate Select Standing Committee investigating self-regulation in the information and communications industries was given evidence of this during its 1998 hearings.
  - 10 "Journalists" are defined in this instance in the broadest sense to include reporters, photographers, camera/sound crews, producers, editors, graphic artists and so on.
  - 11 See Fink, S. (1986); Martin, T.G., and Conte, P. (1992); Gottschalk, J.A. (1993); Mitroff, I.I., and Pearson, C.M. (1993); Dowling, G. (1994); More, E. (1995); Fearn-Banks, K. (1996); Lerbinger, O. (1997). For reasons of space, further discussion on this point will appear in the researcher's thesis.
  - 12 This was repeatedly reported by victims/survivors interviewed for this research.
  - 13 Participants, psychiatrist and counsellors confirmed that victims/survivors frequently sought out media cuttings/clips to make sense of what happened, even if reviewing the same caused them great pain.
  - 14 This "official warning" was mentioned by various media stories, personnel and forensic psychiatrist Dr Ian Sale and confirmed by Mr Bugg himself in a brief telephone conversation with the author.
  - 15 As reported in EMA's record of proceedings of the Port Arthur seminar of 11-12 March 1997.
  - 16 This incident is discussed further in Richard Lower's paper in this issue of APME.
  - 17 This included the distant, chilling video footage which documented

the rapidity of the 18 initial gunshots that fatally mowed down 20 victims and seriously wounded a further dozen people in 15 seconds.

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